

RE-NEGOTIATING THE DISTORTED CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN AFRICA AND IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Abstract

This discourse on the re-negotiation of the distortion of African culture and identity at home and in the diaspora proffers a way out of this dilemma: the contestation for space, vis-a-vis opposition in the mainstream politics between the blacks and the whites in the western world. The paper advocates for a middle ground between both cultures; which hitherto has produced mongrels of cultural and identity distortions. Some selected texts are analyzed in order to realize this concession.

Introduction

The attempt of Africans and the African Diaspora to marry two cultures at the same time, namely, African and Euro-American as people who are caught between two opposing and strange cultural blocks as postulated by W.E.B. Bois depicts them as a race striving to be both European and Black for which they are neither. The paper calls for re-definition by a re-negotiation of the distorted African culture and identity at home and in the Diaspora. Are the culture and identity of Africans and people of African descent at home and the African Diaspora distorted or eroded? Who is to blame for the distortion or eroding of the African culture and identity? Is there any hope for the fast defacing culture and identity of the Africans both at home and in the Diaspora? And what ought to be the way forward out of this dilemma? This paper on the “Re-negotiating the Distorted Culture and identity in Africa and in the African Diaspora” proffers a solution to this ‘sore’ that festers on the people of African descent worldwide; through a textual analyses as its methodology.

The African Diaspora as referred to here by Falola Toyin and Harris Joseph, the Old diaspora created by the Atlantic slave trade as well as Historical Diaspora and the Contemporary Diaspora whom Falola also referred to as the New diaspora, “transnationalism,” and “recent migrants”¹ are all victims of cultural and identity distortion. It is axiomatic to assert that the transatlantic slave trade engendered a colossal community of African descent to settle in America and Europe, most especially in the recent time. The African Diaspora, who can be found all over the world, comes from these major waves of migrations: historic, related to the decolonization process, and political situation of African countries. Whether voluntary or forcefully transported to America or Europe etc., historical Diaspora of or contemporary Diaspora; both the diasporas of enslavement and the diaspora of colonialism and neo-colonialism all stand for the African descent living outside of the African continent as Blacks. These African descents as well as Africans at home became victims of acculturation and distorted

identity as a result of the slave trade and clash of cultures between the Western civilization and the African culture, thereby producing cultural and identity mongrels.

Explication of Concepts and Textual Analyses

Culture as postulated by Ademola in Ekuwemesi and Adewunmi, comprises of material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artefacts, in its broadest form that includes tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensil, housing etc. While the institutional aspect deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve materials and spiritual objectives. The philosophical aspect of the culture concerned with ideas, beliefs and values as against the creative aspect which concerns a people literature, be it moral or written, as well as their visual and performing arts which are normally moulded by, as well help to mould other aspects of culture. In essence, culture is the sum total of a people's way of life that produces similar behaviour and thought among most people in a particular society that also includes the language of the people. It is the total gamut of the culture or way of life of the Africans like dressing, communal living as against the individualistic Eurocentric way of life, the rich African folklores and folktales of storytelling have almost gone extinct because of its replacement with modern cables, satellite and television' movies have now replaced the evening African storytelling times. The African languages as such are badly affected too, only a very few Africans today speak their mother tongues, while most could hardly speak them, the African social way of life, its norms and values as well as the African world view are all threatened and disfigured by the encroachment of the western civilization; which this paper decries.

It is important to stress here that, even before the infiltration of Western culture into the African environment, the Africans, had their culture. as captured by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. And it was in reaction to the misrepresentation of the African history by the Europeans and the denigration of the African culture that most of the early African writers wrote against. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for instance, was prompted by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson* stereotypical denigration of Africans. Achebe lamented the distortion of the Igbo culture which serves as a microcosm of the African culture in the following words: "Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart"³ While NgugiwaThiong'o on the other hand in *The Rivers Between* depicts the experience of the Gikuyus of Kenyan's abandonment of the way of life in the following words.

Joshua and Kabonyi had been converted with the coming of the White mentoSiriana and had abandoned the ways of the ridges as used, as the acceptable particular norms by the people within the ridges and this include their social, political, economic, aesthetic, religious norms and modes of their cultural beliefs.⁴

On another hand, Wole Soyinka Satirizes the distorted dress code of the Europeans by a half-civilized Yoruba teacher who prefers to dress in the white man's attire as deployed in *The Lion and The Jewel*, thus:

The Schoolmaster is nearly twenty-three. He is dressed in an old-style English suit, threadbare but not ragged, clean but no ironed, obviously a size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearingbeneath a shining black

waist-coat. He wears twenty-three inch-bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes.⁵

The situation today is worst in Africa, in terms of dress code as a result of the popular culture of the West that has almost replaced the African modest way of dressing. The 21st Century Africans at home dress almost as nude as their Africans counterparts in Europe. This trend of the preference of what is of Europe to Africa is sadly portrayed by Okot p' Bitek in "The woman with whom I share my Husband" where he also decries this deplorable state of the resultant effect of the popular culture on that of the hybrid-African which Du Bios refers as "twoness, - an American, a negro: two souls, two thought, two unrecognized strivings, two warring ideas in one dark body."⁶ This situation Okot p' pathetically portrays in this poem thus:

Ocol rejects the old type
He is in love with a modern Girl
Who speaks English...

Ocol is longer in with the old type:
He is in love with a modern girl.
The name of the beautiful one is Clementine

Brother, when you see Clementine!
The beautiful one aspires
To look like a white woman;

Her lips are red- hot
Like glowing charcoal,
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood,⁷

The Africans at home like the African Diaspora struggle to be both African and American; justas Du Bios iterates in this statement: "Negro and African, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face".⁸ Braithwaite Edward in "The journey," (Right of Passage) portrays a miserable being that is neither here or there, a muddled situation in which it is difficult to find one's identity. These images deployed here resonate with intensity the dilemma of transculturalization and distorted identity of the Africans as pictures in the dispersion and servitude of the black man:

Never seen a man
travel more
seen more lands
than his poor path-less
harbor less spade.⁹

The above depicted the man (African), as a victim of acculturation, a cultural transformation that is induced by the contact with the imported culture; oftentimes resulting in a cultural change that has tremendously left the African culture and identity in a deplorable and pitiabile state. The African or the African Diaspora is neither here, nor there, the man who straddlesboth worlds ends up as a mongrel of cultural and identity distortion, living on the margin of his society.

It is with a deep sense of nostalgia that this paper recalls the uninterrupted cultural values of African man that placed much value on respect for Elders, chastity among women, dignity of labour, patriotism to one's ethnic group or community as well as self-reliance as it were, before the advent of colonialism. But today, these rich cultural and moral values that were the integral parts of the African man and the African culture has since been distorted and eroded, most especially in the 21st Century where the younger generation is fast losing touch with the African culture or way of life.

The paper does not call for a total rejection of the Europeans culture, but a mediating between the two by accepting the good aspects of the Western culture and discarding the bad side of it. This is an attempt at promoting intercultural and racial co-existence in Africa and in the Diaspora through a re-negotiation between the Western world and Africa. This is due to the fact that the European culture has defaced the African traditional culture and values; this defacement has rendered it as inferior to that of the Western civilization which early writer like Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, Okot p.' etc. Have challenged in their creative works; even the second and the third generations of the African writers have also confronted these issues headlong. In re-negotiating the distorted culture of Africans at home and in the Diaspora, Emmanuel L. Adeniyi's postulation partially lends credence to this discourse that "transculturalism appreciates the fluidity of the present age, the confluence of global cultures, the mobility and nomadic nature of the 21st Century man, and the need to engender a monolithic cultural outlook in a culturally polyvalent society."¹⁰ To say that transculturalism appreciate the fluidity of the present age, the confluence of global cultures,"¹¹ is just stating the obvious, and this agrees with Hall Stuart who defines identities as fluid; and as constantly being negotiated in the interactions between individual and society as its key players. The entails that identity is negotiable and can be re-negotiated at the cause of human interactions in society. Hall further argues that identity as the name we give the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past is not fixed in some essential past; they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.¹² Emmanuel's "need to engender a monolithic cultural outlook in a culturally polyvalent society," is taking with a pinch of salt because of the impossibility of achieving "a monolithic cultural outlook" in a heterogeneous world over six to seven thousand languages. Identities as mentioned by Liman Rasheedah are not fixed in some essential past; they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.¹³ By this postulation, identity therefore is dynamic; it is negotiated and renegotiated by the dynamics of history, culture and power as people interact and, that is the thrust of this paper. And that the byproduct of this negotiation and renegotiation of the identity of the Africans and the Africans Diasporas often result in the forging of a new identity or a formation of a hybrid, which is the Diaspora compromise as occasioned by cultural hybridity as will be foregrounded at the course of this discourse.

The identity of the Africans at home and in the diaspora as well as the African diaspora is not the basis for this intellectual argument; since the identities of the aforementioned are already validated by scholars. Oguzie B.E.C. argues that from the available racial theories, the Afro-Americans have been defined as Africans. Earlier in their history, this had been defined as unwelcome fact to many Afro-Americans and they strove to remove that fact from their consciousness.¹⁴ The distorted identity of the Blacks did not only reflect in their behaviour, but much more in their names, such as: "black people," "Afro-

Americas,” “Africans,” “Negroes,” “Ethiopian,” or “Niggers,” etc. The above cultural metaphors notwithstanding, the Africans at home and in the diaspora, together with the African Diaspora (now referred to as African-Americans) are all mongrels of cultural and identity distortion, what matters the most is that they are either Africans or people of African descent or Blacks.

The trajectory of the narrative of the African-American or Caribbean who was a slave on the plantation farm, with no civil right in the Southern American has now changed to an ostensibly free Euro-American citizen; who is still bigoted and murdered daily on the streets of the “civilized” world that preaches and uphold the sanctity and dignity of the human life. The constant murder of the Blacks by the American police with impunity is indeed alarming today; the most recent killing of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd’s neck until he died is one among several many barbaric acts; such as the killing of Philado Castle in 2016, meted out on the African-Americans or people of African ancestry. Despite the fact that their identity was negotiated by many African Americans/Caribbean’s and some white, from the opposition to the mainstream politics of America, yet, today they are still seen as mongrels, perhaps even the ascension of the first Black American President, Barack Obama to the White House in 2011 has not positively affected and addressed the bane of racism in the 21st Century America; it is also sad to note that even his origin as the American President was some time in question in the face of racial and spatial contestation.

To further argue clearly the diasporic citizenship stance in America or Britain for instance, Amirikpa affirms that diasporic citizens in the context of this discourse are the descendant of African slaves “as the cargo of the international slave trade” and commoditized. The tragedy and problematic of this group of the diaspora are what Ali Mazrui describes as “Dis-Africanisation”- the loss of identity, forceful adaptation of foreign names, loss of natal tongue and tribe in a strange new land. Worse still was, and still is, the problem of acceptability and recognition of the new citizenship status in the new world. He emphasized that J. Williams T. Youngs is of the view that, although the enslaved Africans “were freed during the Civil War but a Century was consigned by law and custom to a separate and unequal place in society until the civil right movement of the 1960s”.¹⁵ But the European immigrants to the New World he further argued were also Diaspora of some sort. The exception has been their ability to identify with their countries and homelands. This distinction has not been the case with almost all the African diaspora of slave ancestry. While in the New World, the Founding fathers decreed that the white immigrants could become members of the new nation on the basis of equal rights with the native-born citizens regardless of their country of origin or religion. Sadly, this same franchise and privilege were denied native-born African-Americans who became victims of political subordination subjugation. Diasporic citizenship is therefore contested in spaces which constitute a political and legal claim between the perceived autochthonous and the diasporic; or aliens whose contested citizenship and identity face the problematic of acceptability and recognition. Urry in Amirikpa defines the African-American as a “victim diaspora” whose citizenship status developed from an unsought association with America. The African-American is seen as a product of Munoz’s “Man’s search for wealth, fame or trade, resulting in conquest and domination...”¹⁶

In furtherance to this re-negotiating the distorted culture and identity in Africa and in the diaspora, it has become pertinent to showcase the relevance of the African race and descent in the world at large and most especially in American or Europe. AmirikpaOyigbenu vividly capture the tremendous contribution of the African Americans to America and the entire world in the following words: that from the primal slave labour which transformed the jungles of the Southern United State which created wealth for both planters and the slave merchants, to the indisputable contributions of Garret A. Morgan (1887-1963), who invented the gas mask and the traffic light, there was also Fred Jones (1893-1961), who invented the truck refrigeration system and the race car. Others include Jan E. Mutezelinger (1852-1889), the inventor of the shoe-lasting machine that revolutionized shoemaking in America. There was also Lewis H. Latimer (1848-1928), who proudly declared that “I was one of the pioneers of the electric lighting industry from its inception...” (Hayden, 10). Africans or blacks have contributed tremendously in all facets of human life and the development of the entire world system. In the assemblage of Black scientists was Elijah McCoy who was acclaimed to have eliminated costly and time-consuming stoppages for lubrication. According to Hayden in Amirikpa, the significance of the invention is underscored by the fact that it is widely used on stationary engines and locomotives of steamships, on trans-Atlantic liners, and on machinery in factories. Granville T. Woods, also known as the “Black Edison,” invented the electro-mechanical brake tunnel construction for an electric railway, and the electric railway conduit. Woods was acclaimed by the Catholic Tribune of Cincinnati, Ohio of January 14, 1886, as “the greatest coloured inventor in history of the race, and equal, if not superior to any inventor in the country...”¹⁷

The above is in no way close to the list of more than 500 Black scientists and inventors of African descent that contributed in very tremendous ways to the development of the whites. Looking at the antecedents and the significant roles of the African descents in the development of the Western world, the paper therefore, advocates for a re-engineering of the minds of especially the Africans at home and African Diaspora or African-American together with their white counterparts on the need for a compromise and respect for the Blacks.

The term compromise here can be an agreement reached with another person or group in which both parties give up something they originally wanted. This compromise is differently depicted by the actions and inactions of character portrayed in the works of African writers- of Caribbean or Afro-American descent. This compromise in most cases may not be absolute, but is very essential today because there is no pure culture worldwide; every human culture is a hybrid of cultural interactions. Luther King Martin puts it much better in the succeeding lines in Anagwonye Ben that: America, I believe we can build on the progress we’ve made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunity and new security for the middle class. I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you’re willing to work hard, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you love. It doesn’t matter whether you are black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, able, disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you’re willing to try.²⁰ The foregoing statement also relates another form of compromise in the re-negotiation, by re-emphasizing the American Dream of 1931. Therefore, this re-negotiation of the distorted culture and identity often results in the Diaspora accepting

what they cannot change, which is their skin pigmentations as Africans or the bastardized culture and identity of the Africans and the Africans Diaspora, but however, can re-negotiate its place, sanctity, Africanity and uniqueness in the comity of human cultures. It is logical to argue at this juncture that the American Dream law serves as the check for the re-negotiation of the distorted culture and identity of the Africans and the Africans Diaspora of both the Old and the New strands, where it reads that:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement... it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of, social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth and position.²¹

Unfortunately, the Blacks and people of colour have been ostracized from this lofty American Dream of 1931 as coined by James Adam Truslow until now, even after the signing of the Civil War Rights act bill into law on July 2, 1964. The African Diaspora or the victim cum contemporary Diaspora are daily segregated upon in the streets of America Europe largely due to their skin pigmentation as their Caribbean brothers of African descent equally laments in *The Lonely Londoners* below:

And Galahad watches the colour of his hand, and on it, saying, 'Colour, is you that is causing all this, you know. Why the hell you can be blue, or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! I ain't do anything to infuriate the people and them, is you! Look at you, you so black and innocent, and this time so you causing misery all over the world!²²

The Biblical Metaphor appears to be the best of all cultural metaphors today. Chong Shiao, one of the proponents of the Biblical Metaphor argues that he believes this "one body with many parts" metaphor is more helpful for thinking about diversity. The body metaphor for a community emphasizes both uniqueness and unity. Each body part has its unique properties and roles yet cannot function independently without the whole. And even though all parts are not equal, all parts are indispensable; even "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22). Applied to cultural diversity, this metaphor stresses the interaction and interdependence of different cultures for the common good of the whole. This cultural metaphor avoids the pitfalls of assimilation on the one hand of disunity on the other. No culture (body part) is so unique as to be untouched by other body parts (cultures). Each culture Chong emphasized is already connected and affected by other, cultures. There are no "pure" unadulterated cultures. Every culture today is a hybrid culture-already and always changing and involving (2).

It is correct to argue that the 21st Century African at home and in the Diaspora is a fusion of the two; African and Western, therefore, the re-negotiation of the distorted culture and identity of the African Diaspora is urgent, hence, the serious eroding of the African norms and values. Which Nwabuisi Malachi Elobuiki lamented that, it is almost impossible to know where... [African] values end and where the Western values start.²³ It is the negative effects of the Western culture on that Africans that this re-negotiation is hanged on. The paper calls for an urgent, deliberate and pragmatic family value re-

negotiations of the unique African culture and identity worldwide, and for the redemption of the defaced culture and identity of the Africans and people of African descent.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the paper is premised on the Biblical Metaphor of one body with many parts, namely: “hands,” “legs,” “head,” “mouth,” “nose,” and other parts signifying the different races and cultures. Therefore, cultural collaborations are not as neat as simply lying next to each other untouched or unaffected by the other cultures lying next to one another (Chong 2015, 2).²⁴As such, both the African and Western cultures need the other to perfectly function as one body with many parts for; a sustainable peace and development in our today’s world. As illustrated in this paper above, the Blacks too have contributed in no small major to the development of humanity and Western civilization, and as such, Africa remains the cradle of civilization. Western culture ought to compliment the African on one hand and the Western, should equally do the same to the African culture on the other hand hence, no culture or civilization is sacrosanct. No race, culture or people is to be seen or assumed to be superior or more superior to any other. Rather, profound respectand mutual understanding for the other race, religion or culture should be held in high esteem as an integral part of the entire body, as propounded in the Biblical metaphor.

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